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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KHARTOUM 001777

SIPDIS

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FOR BPITTMAN AND CHUDSON

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SUBJECT: PLOTTING FOR BASHIR EXIT INTENSIFIES

REF: KHARTOUM 1657

Classified By: CDA Alberto M. Fernandez, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: According to senior SPLM officials, Sudan's NCP is trying to broker a quick and graceful removal of President Al-Bashir within the next few months, with the President going into exile in Saudi Arabia. Discussions on a transition, which should take place before an ICC arrest warrant could be issued, have stalled over who would replace Al-Bashir and under what conditions. The SPLM would like to see aggressive action by the P-3 over the next month to shape such a transition and ensure that Western (and SPLM) concerns are taken into account by the regime's future leaders. End summary.

#### THE IDI AMIN OPTION

¶2. (C) Foreign Minister Deng Alor and SPLM Deputy Secretary General Yassir Arman told CDA Fernandez on December 13 that plotting and deal-making within the National Congress Party (NCP) for a transition of President Omar al-Bashir from power has intensified in recent days but has now hit a predictable snag on the key issues of sequencing and personalities. They outlined how there seems to be consensus within the regime that Al-Bashir "should go soon, preferably before an ICC arrest warrant is issued," to a gilded exile in Saudi Arabia from where, presumably, he could not be extradited to The Hague. Alor said that Al-Bashir has agreed in principle to go. The logical replacement, VP Ali Osman Taha, is hesitant to move forward because of fears of bitter opposition from the Sudanese Army (SAF) which distrusts civilians generally and Taha in particular because of his close ties to NISS chief Salah Ghosh, who has built up Sudan's national security apparatus as a rival to the SAF.

#### A REPLACEMENT WORSE THAN BASHIR?

¶3. (C) Because of Taha's caution, the search has switched now to identifying an acceptable army general who would be agreeable to the different factions within the Islamist elite. The SPLM fears that the NCP could agree on a "younger, more radical version" of Al-Bashir, such as SAF Deputy Chief of Staff Awad Ibn Auf (sanctioned in May 2007 by the USG because of his actions in Darfur while serving as head of Military Intelligence) who would prolong the war in Darfur and play hardball against the SPLM on CPA implementation. "This would be a disaster for us, we would miss Al-Bashir," remarked Arman. Alor also noted that former NCP guru Hassan al-Turabi is still a factor, "he still has some level of support in SAF and the NCP" and continues to plot. The SPLM is convinced that Al-Turabi maintains his ties with the JEM rebel movement in Darfur and Alor related NCP fears of a possible JEM-inspired assassination campaign against regime

leaders.

#### P-3 SHOULD SHAPE THE OUTCOME

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14. (C) The SPLM's preference is that the NCP be pressed by the international community, especially the P-3, in the coming weeks to identify a transitional senior (preferably elderly, "someone who is near his expiry date," Arman noted) general who is acceptable to all three members of Sudan's presidency (Al-Bashir, Taha, and First Vice President Salva Kiir) and would serve as a figurehead to take the country to elections in 2009. The SPLM has begun scouring the list of SAF generals trying to see if it can identify appropriate officers who fit the bill and will share its findings with the US Embassy. Alor said his information is that the Egyptians are doing the same thing as they fear a civilian Islamist taking over in Sudan (reftel). He added that this is an idea Salva Kiir will explore with President Bush in early January in Washington and, hopefully, with Obama transition staff.

15. (C) In such a scenario, P-3 reps would go to the NCP and urge them to pick a figure committed to full implementation of the CPA, a quick end to the Darfur conflict, and an early transition to democracy. This is something like what happened in 1985 when General Nimeiry was overthrown and a military caretaker government oversaw the country's transition back to democracy. Arman noted that because the NCP has reached this internal impasse, the situation remains fluid and could deteriorate within the coming couple of months with the intense jockeying for position and advantage of different factions within the NCP intensifying. Alor said that he hoped

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that French envoy Bruno Joubert would begin to bring a credible and detailed "endgame message" to Khartoum when he visits on December 15.

#### PLAYING A DOUBLE GAME IN ABYEI

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16. (C) Alor said that the NCP had used the JEM/Turabi factor to explain recent fighting in Abyei on December 12-13. His own deputy, NCP insider Muttriff Siddiq, had told him that the NCP fears that JEM plants within SAF may have triggered the fighting in Abyei on purpose to draw SAF south towards the SPLA thereby clearing a path for the much rumored JEM march on the capital, from Darfur through South Kordofan and then across the Nile, or merely for JEM to secure or destroy the oil distribution network in South Kordofan which pumps the crude from Southern oil fields to Port Sudan. Siddiq told Alor that the notorious 31st SAF Brigade, some of whose troops are part of the Abyei JIU, may have been penetrated by JEM.

17. (C) Alor noted that while the fighting in Abyei between SAF soldiers in the Abyei JIU and Abyei police seemed to now be contained, he was livid about the role of UN SRSG Ashraf Qazi in trying to quell the violence. "Ashraf is a nice person, but weak and incompetent," he scoffed. Qazi had refused to order UN troops on the ground to secure the Abyei market, focusing instead on the JIU. "He should secure the market and then push for the entire JIU to leave town." Alor did reluctantly acknowledge UN efforts to keep SAF units in Difra and SPLA units in Agok from moving towards the fighting, steps that could ignite a wider conflagration. He asked that CDA Fernandez urge Qazi to be more pro-active (CDA spoke to Qazi on December 13 and urged more aggressive UNMIS moves to contain the violence. Qazi responded that UNMIS is "doing exactly that").

#### COMMENT

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18. (C) Khartoum has been rife with possible transition scenarios for weeks (reftel) and this latest information is in sync with Al-Bashir's recent declaration that he is willing to step down "if asked by the Sudanese people, not

foreigners." Given the internal divisions within the NCP and the rivalry between NISS and SAF, the SPLM factor, and the machinations of JEM and Al-Turabi, it will be quite difficult to find a candidate acceptable to all sides (although Sudan's abounds with inoffensive former SAF generals). Despite the repeated and well-documented brutality of the regime in Darfur, President Al-Bashir has been exquisitely tuned to an inclusive and congenial form of rule quite comfortable to Sudan's tiny Northern Arab elite. Finding that sort of balance once again, one that gives full rein to the regime's greed and impunity, may not be easy.

FERNANDEZ